

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB MORNING NEWSMAKERSPEAKER: PALESTINE NATIONAL AUTHORITY
REPRESENTATIVE TO THE UNITED STATES HASSAN ABDEL RAHMANLOCATION: NATIONAL PRESS
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SPEAKER: PALESTINE NATIONAL AUTHORITY REPRESENTATIVE TO THE UNITED STATES
HASSAN ABDEL RAHMAN

LOCATION: NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, WASHINGTON, D.C.

BODY:

MR. RAHMAN: Good morning, and thank you for coming.

I was invited here today to share with you our perspective on the situation in the Middle East and discuss with you where we go from here. All of you are aware of probably the intentions of Mr. Sharon when he waged his latest invasion of the Palestinian territories. His main objective was obvious. He wanted to change the political landscape in the region, undo the Oslo peace process and construct a new situation in the Palestinian territories that are -- that is suitable to his own political and ideological positions.

He inflicted a great deal of damage to the Palestinian Authority infrastructure and to the Palestinian society as a whole. The damage that was inflicted was very extensive on the institutions of the Palestinian National Authority, on the economy, on the Palestinian people, and on the infrastructure of the Palestinian people -- the roads, the electricity, the water. Nothing escaped the destruction of the Israeli army.

The number of casualties was very high. It was in the hundreds. And the wounded are in the thousands. Adding to the number that was already very high since the beginning of September the year 2000. So far we have almost about 3,000 Palestinians killed.

We have about 38,000 Palestinian wounded. The number of houses destroyed are in the thousands. Even the crops, trees and -- were not spared the Israeli destruction.

Mr. Sharon was here in Washington last week -- in fact, two days ago -- and he made his plans very clear. Mr. Sharon is not interested in making peace with the Palestinians. He's interested in dictating to the Palestinians the terms of surrender. That was very clear from the statements he made before and after meeting with President Bush. When he was asked about the Palestinian state, he said it was premature to discuss the Palestinian state, thus putting himself against the international consensus that includes also the United States. So we have Mr. Sharon on one side and the rest of the world on the other side.

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The issue of Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories -- Mr. Sharon refused to discuss the issue of the continuation of building Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories.

One month after the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1402 and 1403, still the Israeli Army has not withdrawn from the Palestinian cities and towns. Every single Palestinian city is encircled by the Israeli Army.

So the situation in the Palestinian territories continue(s) to deteriorate as a result of the Israeli policies. Mr. Sharon is intent on undermining the international efforts that are being made at the moment to move the region from the brink of total war into the path of peace.

I take this opportunity to thank President Bush and the European leaders and the secretary-general of the United Nations for the efforts they are exerting to move the region back into the political path, because without a vision for peace and without a plan to achieve that peace, the region can only go into further confrontation and further bloodshed.

The terms of the political settlement as we see it are very -- were made very clear by the Arab summit conference in Beirut. The adoption of the Saudi peace initiative, Prince Abdullah, which calls for Israel's withdrawal from the Arab territories that were occupied in 1967, in exchange for the establishment of full diplomatic and normal relations with Israel, are the foundations for any peace process.

We cannot, the Palestinian people, accept again to become involved in interim arrangements. Interim arrangements are a formula for the continuation of Israel's occupation; consequently, they are a formula for confrontation because the Israeli occupation, in our views, is really the infrastructure of terrorism in our region, because occupation is a system of terror and it is also a systematic terrorism against the Palestinian people. So, occupation generates resistance. And if we're to deal with the whole situation of violence in the region, occupation must end, with all that it entails, including, of course, the construction of illegal Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories.

Our position on this is very clear because we have seen the statements made by Sharon and by his advisers and by the spokesmen and a spokeswoman of Israeli government that he wants long-term interim arrangements, after which a discussion on final status can take place. We cannot accept that.

We will accept a process that the conclusion of which is very clear to us. There is an internationally accepted solution, and that is the establishment of an independent Palestinian state along the lines of 1967 boundaries. This endgame has to be clear from the beginning, and any process must be a plan to achieve that objective and not to negotiate about negotiations or interim arrangements.

This is what I have to say this morning. If you have any questions, I would be more than happy to answer. Thank you very much.

MR. HICKMAN: (Off mike) -- give your name and affiliation. And keep your hands up long enough for me to see you with all these lights in my eyes. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Try to remember the order. Please use the floor mikes. Just line up -- I forgot about the floor mikes. Just line up -- (off mike).

MR. RAHMAN: Yes?

Q Good morning. I'm Jonathan Wright from Reuters. Hassan, I wondered if you could give your interpretation to us of this sudden interest that there seems to be in reform of the Palestinian Authority. What's your interpretation? How do you explain this sudden interest and how do you intend to deal with it?

MR. RAHMAN: We heard about it in the papers, of course. We were not approached by anyone to ask us for that. However, we feel that good governance and democracy and the construction of and building of efficient institutions of the Palestinian Authority are Palestinian demands; those are Palestinian objectives. We want to have an efficient government for the Palestinian people. We want a democratic government, and we do not need advice from abroad on our need for that. We will do it ourselves and we will do it to serve the interests of the Palestinian people.

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Our security institutions, of course, will be in charge of maintaining law and order in the Palestinian territories. Their main interest and main function will be to preserve the Palestinian security, security for the Palestinian people. But also, it will protect any agreement that we sign with anyone, with Israel or with anybody else. So we are very ready to engage in reconstruction of our national institutions and institutions of the Palestinian National Authority.

MR. HICKMAN: First question over here. Those of you on this side of the room who have questions, you might want to line up behind the mike over there, please. (Off mike.) Yes, sir?

Q Good morning. Brad Wright with CNN. It's been suggested that the Israeli response to the latest suicide bombing probably will come in Gaza. Do you believe that's the case? What do you think the proportion of this will be?

MR. RAHMAN: Well, if Mr. Sharon was looking for a pretext to destroy Gaza, he can have a pretext -- I mean, this tragic event of the day before yesterday or any other event.

We hope that there will be enough pressure on Mr. Sharon, you know, not -- in order not to become involved in such an aggression, because each Israeli incursion in the Palestinian territories, each killing of a Palestinian by Israel, any destruction of Palestinian property by Israel would only lead to the generation of more defiance and more hostility towards Israel. The Israeli tanks and bulldozers do not bulldoze only Palestinian roads, but they also bulldoze the foundations of possibilities of peace with Israel.

So what we need, really, is instead of violence and counterviolence, is a path outside of this vicious circle. We need to look at the causes of this conflict and deal with them, rather than dealing with the symptoms.

MR. HICKMAN: Question over here.

Q I'm Jim Harriot (sp), Worldnet TV division of the Voice of America. There's a front-page story in the New York Post today that indicates President Bush -- I'm paraphrasing -- in effect is saying that nothing can go forward until Chairman Arafat goes. Are you aware of the story, and your response?

MR. HICKMAN: No, I am not aware of this particular story. I am aware of what is being said on behalf of Mr. Bush by everybody except Mr. Bush himself. So Mr. Bush had not told us that, and I -- from the statements that I hear from members of the administration, that's not the case. Mr. Bush and Colin Powell both believe that President Arafat is essential for any progress to be made on the Palestinian-Israeli track, and that his role is very, very important to move the process forward.

Q So if I may follow, you're saying that Chairman Arafat stays and Mr. Bush has, in effect, been misquoted?

MR. RAHMAN: I didn't see that quote by Mr. Bush, but what I'm saying is that this is the message we get from the administration -- that Yasser Arafat is essential for the peace process; his role is important, being the elected leader of the Palestinian people. We have not been told by the Americans any other position.

MR. HICKMAN: If that is the position --

MR. RAHMAN: I'm not going really to --

MR. HICKMAN: Hypothetical.

MR. RAHMAN: No. I'm not going to deal with hypothetical questions, no.

MR. HICKMAN: All right.

Q Matt Berger (sp) with JTA.

Do you believe that Chairman Arafat's comments yesterday in Arabic was a significant step? And do you think that it will have an effect on quelling the violence?

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MR. RAHMAN: Well, I think they are reiteration of previously stated positions. If you look at the speech of Yasser Arafat on December 16th in Arabic, it contained exactly the same substance. If you look at the speech of Yasser Arafat that was made to the Arab Summit conference on March 28th, it included exactly the same thing. Probably he used stronger language yesterday, but it is the same substance.

And our position has been always very clear: We are against any action against Israeli civilians -- that's directed against Israeli civilians in the same manner that we condemn and oppose and ask others to do the same when Israel directs its attacks against Palestinian civilians. So that -- we wanted to have Palestinian and Israeli civilians out of this conflict. So this is a very, very principled position of the Palestinian Authority.

Q But if he's made these comments before and suicide bombings have not stopped, does that say something about his leadership in the Palestinian Authority?

MR. RAHMAN: No, it does not. It says something about the circumstances. You see, Yasser Arafat will make all the statements necessary, and he will exert all the efforts that are necessary, but whether he succeeds or not does not depend on Yasser Arafat alone. It depends also on the way the Israeli government and the Israeli army behave towards the Palestinian people. You cannot tell every Palestinian whose mother or father or children are killed not to react. It's impossible. You cannot stop the Palestinians who live under siege, under miserable situation -- 60 percent of them are unemployed. People have to carry their children to school because they're not allowed to drive their cars. If they cannot walk, if they cannot go to their businesses, if they are humiliated on a daily basis, you can't tell them "Don't react." They -- even if you tell them "Don't react," they are not going to listen to you. That's why we believe in order for us to succeed in our effort, we need two conditions.

One is the incentive to the Palestinian public. We have to tell the Palestinian public there is light at the end of the tunnel, your situation is changing. But if all that we are promised is more Jewish settlements and more Israeli oppression, then it is -- the second is you need the instruments to achieve that, and that is the Palestinian security forces, which has been battered and destroyed by the Israeli troops.

So, yes, Arafat will use his moral authority, he would use his political authority, but in order to achieve that objective, much more is needed.

MR. HICKMAN: A question over here?

Q That's close to what I wanted to discuss. My name's Ron Baejents (ph), Kuwait News Agency.

MR. RAHMAN: Yes?

Q If no one can influence Mr. Sharon, and to date there's no indication that anyone can, and then if Mr. Arafat cannot control Hamas, I question -- and I would like you to discuss -- how would Mr. Tenet's visit and this idea of reconstituting the Palestinian security -- let's assume that some time passes and it is reconstituted -- how would this influence Hamas, Islamic Jihad? Is this also not futile?

MR. RAHMAN: First of all, let me deal with the first part of your question, and that is, no one can influence Sharon. I believe that Sharon can be influenced.

Q By --

MR. RAHMAN: I mean, listen, Sharon cannot defy the whole international community.

Q He has to date.

MR. RAHMAN: Well, he has to date because there was acquiescence and tolerance to his positions from the United States. But if the United States -- look at what happened in the United Nations over the question of the international commission of inquiry into the war crimes in Jenin. I mean, you have 14 positive votes and only one negative vote. If the United States did not provide that protection for Sharon, I assure you that Sharon may be indicted for war crimes. So the United States can and has the possibilities to pressure Sharon. Sharon cannot defy the whole international community, cannot -- peace in the region is not so irrelevant that it can be left to Sharon to decide, because the impact of peace and war in the

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region has repercussions for the Israelis, for the Palestinians, for the Arabs, for the United States, for everyone. So you cannot let Mr. Sharon free-handed, because we know how Mr. Sharon operates.

Now, as far as Hamas is concerned, we, as I said, will do everything within our means to achieve control of those elements who want to carry on actions against Israeli civilians.

But whether we will succeed 100 percent or not is going to depend on Israeli behavior in the Palestinian territories also, because if Israel behaves in such a way to provoke the Palestinian people, it is difficult to have full control and full success. That's what I'm trying to say.

But as far as efforts are concerned, we are willing to exert our efforts. Now results is going to depend also on the Israelis and their behavior in the Palestinian territories.

Q I'm Lori Kinney (sp) with Hearst-Argyle Television. Are you concerned at all that in addition to the military response that the Israeli cabinet has apparently authorized, that the Israelis will take this opportunity to go that one step further and perhaps arrest and exile Mr. Arafat? Has -- it has been suggested before. And if that were to happen, what would the result be and the results for the Palestinian leadership?

MR. RAHMAN: Well, I hope they will not, because if they take such a very drastic and irresponsible and dangerous step, I think they will open the gates of the conflict wide open, that it becomes very, very difficult to bring it -- to bring the genie back into the bottle.

Q Are you concerned that it's a real possibility?

MR. RAHMAN: I mean, I cannot trust Mr. Sharon -- and his chief of staff, of course.

MR. HICKMAN: Question over here?

Q Ed Epstein from the San Francisco Chronicle. To follow up on these questions about the calls for reforming the Palestinian Authority and possibly removing Chairman Arafat, at the White House on Tuesday, Condoleezza Rice was asked repeatedly if Israel should negotiate with Arafat, and she just never said yes.

MR. RAHMAN: But did she say no?

Q She kept saying that he's the elected head of the authority, but she never would say yes. And also, I believe the president and Condi Rice said that -- called for new leadership, said so far the leadership of the authority has failed the Palestinian people terribly. So I think that's where these stories came from, plus this call for reform was seen as a kind of a code word to bring new leadership to the authority. Is that the way you read it?

MR. RAHMAN: Well, I -- I honestly don't feel like getting involved in a dispute with the president over his assessment of the performance of the Palestinian Authority. I am interested in one thing, and that is, does the United States recognize Yasser Arafat as the elected leader of the Palestinian people or not? If President Bush is asking Yasser Arafat to lead better, then he believes that he is the leader and, therefore, that's his opinion.

Now, on the question of the legitimacy of the leadership of Yasser Arafat, I don't think it is anyone's business to decide who is the leader of the Palestinian people except the Palestinians themselves. In the same way we think that Sharon is a war criminal, but the Israeli people elected him. If you ask 90 percent of the Arab world, they think that Sharon is a war criminal, and he's a bully, and he's a murderer. But that's not our business, that's the Israeli people who elected him and put him there.

We are interested not in the person, we are interested in solving the issues. And so let's deal with the issues, because focusing on the person, in my views, is a pretext for not dealing with the issues. Sharon is focusing on Yasser Arafat not because what he thinks is right or wrong, because he really does not want to deal with the issues of occupation, of building illegal Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories. He does not want to deal with any of those so he focuses on Yasser Arafat.

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Q What do you make of President Bush's continual refusal to talk to Arafat?

MR. RAHMAN: Well, I mean, the American administration deals with Yasser Arafat. That's why you have the secretary of State dealing with him, talking to him almost weekly. The time will come when President Bush will deal with Yasser Arafat. For the time being, we deal with the secretary of State.

MR. HICKMAN: Let me go to somebody who hasn't had a question yet.

Q Carl Osgood with Executive Intelligence Review. I'd like you to comment on the timing of this latest, most recent bombing, since it came just as Sharon was meeting with Bush in the White House. Even Richard Cohen, in the Washington Post this morning, suggests that the only person who benefits from this is Sharon himself because it serves his political and ideological purposes.

MR. RAHMAN: I don't believe in conspiracy mentalities. I think that the practical effect of this tragic incident is very damaging to the Palestinian cause. And therefore, we are opposed to it, and we are against it. And I think President Arafat made it clear that he will take action against the -- look for the perpetrators and take action against them.

Q Miles Pomper (sp) from Congressional Quarterly.

Two questions: One is, on this question of political reform, it's been suggested that perhaps Mr. Arafat would move to more of a ceremonial role, and there'd be some sort of prime minister -- or a constitutional change, who would do more of the day-to-day government of the Authority. I wanted your reaction to that. And secondly, wanted your reaction to -- there's a bill by Senator McConnell and Senator Feinstein on the Hill to cut ties with the Authority and what effect that would have if it became law.

MR. RAHMAN: Well, you know, I watched those members of Congress in action, and I've seen their positions made public on television. And lastly I'm very, very disappointed by what I see, because those positions are neither based on legality nor on morality.

And they don't even serve the political interest of the United States. You have the Senate of the United States and the Congress acting against the president of the United States in support of a foreign power. In my views, this is even nationally irresponsible, because once -- when the whole world is moving in one direction, and the Congress of the United States is trying to gear things in a totally opposite direction -- I am totally disappointed when I see the Congress of the United States that is supposed to be the bastion of law and order, of rule of law and democracy, endorsing an action by a government that was condemned by everyone in the world, including the United States of America. So this tells something about the motives and the reasons behind those positions.

It is not that the whole world is wrong and Dianne Feinstein is right. So again, if it is illegal and if it is immoral, I don't think it's going to have any relevance to what happens in our region.

MR. HICKMAN: Barry, and then Hilary.

Q Oh, sure. Barry Schweid, AP. Could you elaborate, please, a little bit on the Palestinian Authority's willingness to engage in reconstituting security forces? I mean, do you see particular things down the road? Talks? Also, and a small point, I'm a little confused because your -- the Palestinian position has been that these forces were decimated by the Israelis, so how much work has to be done?

MR. RAHMAN: Well, I mean, not every one single Palestinian who is a member of the security was killed. I'm not saying that. What was decimated is the infrastructure; namely, the buildings, the automobiles, the cars, the (files ?), et cetera, et cetera. So you have to reconstitute those. Now, the reconstitution of the Palestinian security forces will be in accordance with the perceived needs of the Palestinian people. That's what I'm trying to say. And definitely we have to reconstruct those. We will use technical assistance from anyone who offers it to us. We will discuss among ourselves how to build -- rebuild it in a more efficient way. But again, the guidance for that are the interests of the Palestinian people and the maintenance of the law and order in the Palestinian society, and, of course, to safeguard any commitments that we make with our neighbors, including Israel.

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Q But, I mean, are there meetings with Americans --

MR. RAHMAN: We have not had any Americans visiting. We heard that Mr. George Tenet will come to the region, and we welcome him.

Q Hilary Mackenzie with Southam News. The suicide bombings, as you have said, give Sharon the excuse, the figleaf, not to deal with the settlements and the underlying issue of the occupation. How do you impress upon Bush and others that that is indeed the case and try and change that? I've just come back from there, and the Israeli people, the Jewish people, many of whom were indeed in the peace camp in '95, '96, are now firmly behind Sharon because they don't feel that they've got any -- you know, that they can escape the suicide bombings.

So how do you -- you know, how do you break that --

MR. RAHMAN: Well, we realize that the peace camp in Israel has been damaged, and we are very concerned about that because those are our partners in the peace process, and for any future peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis, the overwhelming majority of the Israeli society must join the peace camp; we are very aware of that -- otherwise, we cannot make peace with Israel, because you may reach an agreement with the Israelis, unless the public supports it, it is not going to work.

On the same way on the Palestinian side. If you looked at the Palestinians also, we had 75 percent or more for the peace process. Today maybe this number is much, much less. But there is something very interesting about the polls in Israel and in the Palestinian -- on the Palestinian side. While you may have 80 percent of the Israelis support Sharon, yet you have a majority that supports the peace process, if and when it can be achieved. On the Palestinian side, the same thing; you may have 82 percent of the Palestinians who are supporting violence against Israel, but 70 percent will support a peace agreement with Israel based on the accepted fundaments (sic) of a peace process. In other words, when there is confrontation, it is always the right wing, the extremists will be in the majority. When there is a process on the table, I believe it would be supported by the overwhelming majority of both sides -- Palestinians and Israelis alike.

So, even President Bush, in the presence of Sharon the other day, said, "Hopelessness creates suicide bombers." I think he was addressing himself to Mr. Sharon; that the conditions of the Palestinian people have really to improve considerably so we can succeed in our effort to stop the suicide bombing, not -- I am opposed -- I want to make it clear; I am opposed to the suicide bombing not because of what it does to Israel only, but because of what it does to our society. I don't want to see Palestinian youth wanting to die and kill others in the process. We want a Palestinian youth that loves life; that's -- because that's the way I was brought up, and that's how my generation was brought up. And I blame Israeli brutality for brutalizing the Palestinian society, turning a very peaceful society into a violent society, because the system of violence imposed on the Palestinians turned many, many Palestinians into violence.

If you look at our society before 1967 and after 1967, any sociological study of this Palestinian society behavior before 1967, even before the Likud came to power in Israel, will find out that violence was very, very minimum. In fact, it was unknown as I was growing up in Palestine. And today it has become the norm as a result of the occupation and what has done to the Palestinian society.

And I hope that we can reverse this process -- we can go back, because even if you look at the eight years of peaceful negotiations with Israel, you will have the curve going down. In the year 2000, until September, there was not one single suicide bombing. And now it is going up because the number of Palestinian casualties, the pain inflicted on the Palestinians is so huge that it is turning people who would have otherwise not been even involved politically into -- involved into becoming involved in resistance and violence.

Q If I may just go back to the question: You don't appear to be able, or you're not succeeding in getting that point across, whereas the Israelis and Sharon have managed very successfully with their spin machine to turn this into a September 11th and a war on terrorism, whereas the fundamental point of occupation and of the settlements is not being addressed.

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MR. RAHMAN: That's absolutely true. And that is not only due to our failure in reaching the American public and the Israeli public, but also to the overwhelming propaganda machine that is working day and night to perpetuate those distortions. You know, you look around, and you see that is the business of the pro-Israeli think tanks in this city, the media, the -- who support Israel, the right-wingers in this city and around the country. But I mean, haven't you noticed that there's a difference between American public's perception and the rest of the world's perception of what's going on? Even in Israel, there's much more debate within the Israeli Knesset over Sharon's policy than in the American Congress.

There's much more debate within the Israeli press over Israeli policies than in the American press. But that's not the case outside of the United States, because here it seems that anyone who is engaged in criticism of Sharon's policies is intimidated by either being called an -- anti-Semites or anti-Israel or -- so people are really -- or for any other reason. But that's not the case elsewhere.

MR. HICKMAN: Any more questions? (Off mike.)

MR. RAHMAN: Well --

MR. HICKMAN: If not, please don't forget to add your name to the sign-in sheet.

MR. RAHMAN: Thank you very much. Thank you. (Applause.)

END

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